



Meriem Bennani: *Siham and Hafida*

The Brooklyn Rail, October 2017

(author: Jane Cavalier)

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by Jane Cavalier

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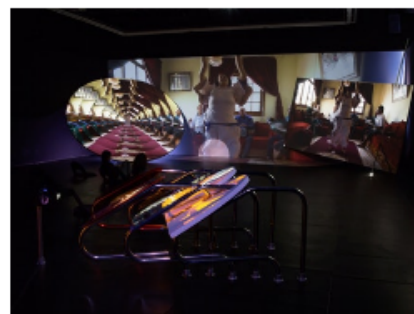
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With a distinctive combination of documentary storytelling, slapstick humor, and cartoonish animations, Meriem Bennani transforms the main gallery of the Kitchen into a theater of the absurd with her spectacular new video installation, *Siham and Hafida* (2017). Projected across a range of screens and deceptively complex abstract objects that recall the basic geometric shapes of early-stage animations, the videos tell the story of a generational clash between two *chikhas*. A *chikha* is a Moroccan female entertainer who performs song and dance in the musical style of *Aita*. During French colonial rule, *chikhas* propagated messages of resistance through their lyrics. *Chikha* became a sphere of female independence, even as the tantalizing, hip-shaking performance style was associated with prostitution. In recent years, a new wave of social-media savvy *chikhas* has emerged to carry the tradition to ever-wider audiences online.



Meriem Bennani, installation shot of *Siham & Hafida*. Photography by Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and The Kitchen.

Bennani creates a thrilling crescendo of drama when she stages a meeting between an older and younger *chikha*. Self-absorbed and addicted to her cell-phone, the young Siham charms Bennani's camera with her big smile and contagious laugh, but appears stiff in live performances. The older, more traditional Hafida criticizes Siham for her lack of training and historical appreciation of the art form. The two are bound to hate each other, but Bennani's editorial interventions, which both dramatize the women's rivalry and add a layer of humorous commentary invisible to the protagonists, render their meeting delightfully doomed.



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Bennani's animations range from the abstract to the cutely cartoonish. In one scene, she swarms Hafida's face with polka dots as she describes her early memories of performing on television. Later, she tucks an animated crab into the furniture of Hafida's home, playing a game of "Where's Waldo?" with her animated interventions. She associates each of the protagonists with an animated animal – Siham, with a butterfly, and Hafida, with a crab – which she camouflages into the surrounding scene. The protagonists are unaware of the animated world that dances around them, and their cluelessness creates a humorous back-and-forth between the contrived and the real. Bennani also presents the same video simultaneously in different, at times hallucinatory formats – kaleidoscopic, zoomed in, or shot from a distance. Carefully orchestrating multiple points of attention and competing levels of reality, the video installation structures a spectatorial mode driven less by narrative than by a constant search for her next visual prank.

In one scene, Bennani's camera gets up close and personal with Siham as she has her make up professionally done in preparation to meet Hafida. Zoomed-in shots of Siham giggling and chatting radiate across the video screens. The camera floats mischievously above her face, echoing the buoyancy of the animated butterfly that will later land on her nose as she primps in a mirror before the meeting. She swats the butterfly away, mistaking it for a blemish, and the scene is transformed into a joke on the limits of her perception and her obsession with her appearance. Later in the scene, Siham unwittingly drowns Hafida's animated spirit animal, the crab, in a pool of cream on her saucer. Hafida, meanwhile, takes a gurgling sip of her juice, and the sound is exaggerated to heighten the awkwardness between the women. Helplessly unaware of the animations surrounding them, Siham and Hafida operate like slapstick comedians, unable to spot the next of Bennani's gags. Gleefully jumping back and forth between the documentary and contrived components of the story, Bennani unravels the relation between cause and effect to create irruptions of humor and absurdity.



Meriem Bennani, installation shot of *Siham & Hafida*. Photography by Jason Mandella. Courtesy the artist and The Kitchen.

Inserting animations, warping perspectives, and adding overblown sound effects, Bennani creates an atmosphere in which everything becomes tinged with a sense of the silly and the surreal. Blurring the lines between the familiar and the strange, Bennani's interventions also magnify the magic of the *chikha* performance itself, as she edits the footage to create mesmerizing and even hallucinatory visions of the performances. In a group practice session with the older generation of musicians, a guest *chikha* begins to dance, and Bennani edits the footage so that the momentum of her gyrating hips spreads to the whole of her body and she appears almost

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liquid. Swelling across the screens and towering over audiences, who are seated on the floor, the *chikha* sweeps them up in her pulsating waves. Following the end of Siham and Hafida's meeting, Bennani makes the video screen roil once again, when she animates a swarm of hundreds of butterflies and crabs that explodes into a vibrating abstract pattern. Giving these immaterial animations the weighted sound of metal objects, Bennani creates a symphony of crunching, clanging, and clashing that sweeps through the installation. In this moment, the sights and sounds of her videos resonate with the art of *Aita* itself by flooding audiences with experiences of awe and delight.